Speech Delivered at the Sierra Leone Open Science Symposium
Topic: Open Data Policy Process
Ms. Yeama Sarah Thompson – Founder and Executive Director, Initiatives for Media Development (IMdev)
Wednesday, August 23, 2023

Mr. Chairman, Fellow Panelists, All protocols duly observed.

I am very pleased to be part of this important symposium on Open Science and it is indeed a special day for Open Data.

Sierra Leone always takes pride on the global stage in its significant advancements toward the establishment of essential institutional and legal frameworks to facilitate a comprehensive Open Data Initiative. Notably, substantial progress has been achieved in expanding the horizons of the data revolution. Our history in this regard dates back to the year 2013 when the Right to Access Information bill was enacted into law. This milestone was succeeded by the signing of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2014, an Open Data Readiness Assessment by the World Bank and the subsequent adoption of the Open Data Charter principles in 2016.

These milestones are indicative of Sierra Leone's commitment to promoting transparency and accessibility in data-driven domains. Our journey towards open government has been further enriched by the fruitful collaboration with the Office of the Deputy Presidency of the Government of Kenya. Through this collaboration, Sierra Leone embraced opportunities for peer learning and support in the realm of open government.

During my tenure as Commissioner at the Right to Access Information Commission (RAIC), I was entrusted with the facilitation and enforcement of Freedom of Information rights and responsibilities with emphasis on the proactive disclosure of information. The initiation of an open data initiative underscored the dedication to one of the Commission's core mandates. This initiative revolutionized collaboration for the enhancement of data quality and accessibility to ultimately foster collective improvement.

Distinguished Guests, to move the needle on the Open Data Initiative, both the RAIC and Stats SL championed the establishment of a multi-stakeholder Open Data Council (ODC). This council was co-chaired with invaluable support from the Ministry of Information and Communications, which played a pivotal role as the Ministerial Lead. With a forward-looking vision, the council aligned with principles that underscore the importance of accessible, usable, and ethical data.

The Open Data Council operated with a dual purpose: to facilitate data access in an open and participatory manner, and to propel and reinforce innovative reforms in data transparency. The need for accessible, high-quality real-time data and data infrastructure for informed decision-making and effective policy implementation is well-acknowledged.

Yet, several challenges persist, including the existence of data stored in non-user-friendly formats, data deficits in various sectors, limited collaboration and partnership for addressing data gaps, inadequate access to up-to-date data and requisite infrastructure, and the absence of a technology platform for efficient access and utilization of various data types.

Nonetheless, Sierra Leone has made remarkable strides in its data landscape through the establishment and utilization of pertinent institutional and policy frameworks. Noteworthy achievements include the development of the Open Data portal II for public information access, training initiatives to enhance open data skills among public officials, pilot projects for regional open data centers, and collaboration with global initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD).

The establishment of data collaboratives to tackle sector-specific data challenges in Agriculture, Environment, and Education sectors has further strengthened our commitment to data transparency and innovation. Through these collaboratives, stakeholders have convened to deliberate on challenges, identify solutions aligned with institutional needs, and foster enhanced collaboration.

In line with the resolve by the partners of the multi stakeholder council to continually expand data accessibility for our citizens and institutions, I am

pleased that the Sierra Leone Library community remains dedicated to building local capacity, ensuring leadership, and nurturing ownership of data development processes (and I see Professor Miriam Conteh Morgan and Mr Thomas Songu in the room, dedicated leaders who contributed greatly to the discussions when we incubated the Open Data Council).

As Sierra Leone continues pushing the boundaries of data access, I am also pleased that the Universities in Sierra Leone are building upon the solid foundation we have laid, to contribute t6o the sustainable development of our nation.

Distinguished Guests, as we gather here today to discuss open data and transparency in the realms of science, research, and governance, it is evident that our nation's commitment to innovation and progress continues to shine brightly. The journey we have embarked upon, one that encompasses the establishment of institutional frameworks, legal provisions, and collaborative initiatives, exemplifies Sierra Leone's dedication to a future where data is a catalyst for positive change.

In this dynamic landscape, the integration of open data policies within our academic institutions holds profound potential. The nexus between open science and education is a nexus of innovation, discovery, and transformation. Recognizing this, it becomes crucial to outline an Open Data Policy process tailored to universities in Sierra Leone, thereby fostering a culture of transparency and collaboration that resonates with our national aspirations.

Distinguished Guests, allow me to make a few recommendations for an Open Data Policy process for Open Science:

1. **Assessment and Stakeholder Engagement:**
- Identify key stakeholders within universities, including faculty, researchers, administrators, and students.
- Conduct a thorough assessment of existing data management practices, data sharing culture, and technological infrastructure.

- Engage stakeholders through workshops, surveys, and consultations to understand their needs, concerns, and expectations regarding open data.

2. **Policy Formation and Development:**
- Establish a multi-stakeholder universities-wide committee responsible for policy formulation, comprising representatives from various faculties and research centers.
- Research existing Open Data Policies from other universities and institutions to draw insights and best practices.
- Develop a comprehensive policy statement that outlines the objectives, scope, principles, and advantages of the Open Data Policy.
- Specify data types covered, ethical considerations, data sharing protocols, licensing options, and alignment with national and international guidelines.

3. **Technical Infrastructure Enhancement:**
- Collaborate with universities IT departments to design and implement a robust technical infrastructure capable of supporting data storage, sharing, and accessibility.
- Evaluate and select suitable data repository platforms that align with the universities resources and requirements.
- Prioritize data security, privacy, and compliance with data protection regulations by implementing encryption, access controls, and authentication mechanisms.

4. **Capacity Building and Training:**
- Develop a series of training programs and workshops to educate university stakeholders about the significance of open data, ethical considerations, data management best practices, and data sharing protocols.
- Provide resources such as guidelines, templates, and case studies to empower faculty, researchers, and students to adopt open data practices.

- Nurture a culture of responsible data sharing, emphasizing the value of sharing both positive and negative research outcomes.

5. Policy Implementation and Evaluation:

- Present the draft Open Data Policy to university leadership, relevant faculty bodies, and committees for feedback and endorsement.
- Address feedback received and refine the policy accordingly.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor policy adherence and data sharing activities, and periodically assess the policy's effectiveness in promoting open data practices.

Let me conclude by congratulating SLREN and LIBSENSE and its dynamic leadership led by Dr Thomas Songu with the high hope that open data and its alignment with open science principles will set the stage for transformative change. By tailoring an Open Data Policy process for Open Science, LIBSENSE will extend the benefits of transparency and collaboration to our academic landscape. This process holds the potential to shape the future of education and research in Sierra Leone, fostering a culture where data is a shared resource, innovation is nurtured, and progress is inclusive.

Thank you for your attention.

End